

Interview with Reece Terris by Western Front Exhibitions Programme Coordinator Mandy Ginson.

Reece Terris's *The Western Front Front: Another False Front* is a public art project commissioned by Western Front Exhibitions and presented with the Vancouver 2010 Cultural Olympiad. Terris designs and builds large architectural installations. These works frequently exaggerate structural elements and reposition architectural design, as the design of experience. Recent projects by Terris include *Bridge (Wooden Arch)* (2006), a bridge spanning two residential properties, and *Ought Apartment* (2009), a multi-storey apartment tower representing six decades of domestic space.

The Western Front Front: Another False Front considers the historic and contemporary relationships between architectural design and projected ambition. In the following interview, Terris discusses the project and its connections to façadism, planned place, and the conditions of citizenship.

Western Front Exhibitions: Can you begin by describing the project for us?

Reece Terris: Candice Hopkins, former Western Front Exhibitions Director/Curator, came to see my bridge project and suggested I develop a proposal for the Western Front. I was attracted to the false front on the exterior of the building and began to research its origins. This is how I came to the idea for *Another False Front*. A false front is a façade that visually adds height, and occasionally ornamentation, to a modest building. The practice developed in the mid- 1800's as a way to make western boomtowns look more established. The Western Front Front will be a second, exaggerated false front built onto the existing front. This new front will be approximately one-and-a-half times the size of the original, and raise the roofline by more than eight feet. The new cornice will be installed at an angle and loom over the sidewalk below, to further exaggerate its size. Originally, I had been thinking about this project in relation to the real estate bubble in Vancouver. I'd been thinking about the relationship between this current economic upturn and the gold-rush era of westward expansion and rapid growth. I really liked the idea of this boomtown architecture coming full circle with present-day Vancouver. I think that beyond this relationship, the project speaks to the past and present use of architecture as a means to communicate broader cultural values and aspirations. The project has been two years in the making and the real estate market has changed, but there's still a boom here. I think that, with the Olympics, the context for the work has only become more interesting.

Is there still a 'west'? Is there still a psychology of optimism and opportunity attached to physical place?

I think that 'west' did exist. It existed. People worked really hard but it was all about want for a better life. I was at the Western Front a few days ago and there was a crowd of thirty-to-forty-somethings gathered at a new condo development across the street. There were 200-300 people out in the pouring rain, lined up for condos. Developers barbequed hotdogs and burgers for the crowd while a local radio station broadcast the event live, blasting Led Zeppelin and promoting the opportunity to win the keys to a brand new condo. Everyone was lined up beside a derelict old building—the current office for the development company. There's a big billboard advertising the development, with a beat walking out of the frame, an artsy-looking guy with his hands clasped behind his back, head down, funky hat, crappy runners. It's all so packaged. A lifestyle is being bought and sold. Everyone in the lineup knows. Still, everyone has to live somewhere. The cost of housing here will keep your shoulder to the wheel. But that lineup, I think that's still about want for a better life.

Can you talk about façadism in relation to this project?

Façadism is the practice of demolishing a historic building, leaving the façade intact, and building around it. You see it downtown. You see it in Gastown. You see it a bit with the Woodward's project. The idea is that we're saving something, but we're not really. It's an effort, but it's not a commitment. It's an erasure. It ruptures the real history of the building, disconnects it from the city, and speaks to the way we treat historic buildings and history here in general. Contemporary residential development contributes to this architectural confusion; we have whole blocks of mock-1920's, pseudo-Craftsman townhouses. Between the free standing "heritage" façade and made-to-look-old, new homes, what is real? It all looks like a movie set, we're a set city. So we have new buildings that don't relate to their time, we don't know how to save what we have, and we don't know how to integrate new architectural styles. I think that Another False Front is in dialogue with all of these things.

What does a modern city look like?

Vancouver almost looks like Hong Kong. I don't mind some of the buildings, I don't mind some glass and a vertical line, but I don't know how it's going to read in fifty years, or how long those buildings will stay up, or what it is they are meant to relate to. Everything is designed to look the same, to feel the same. I've lived here a long time, I was born here, but I don't really recognize it. It's a big mirror but there's no real reflection, there's no space. You see the mountains or you see the ocean, Vancouver is always saved by its surroundings. You're never looking in here and maybe that's part of the problem. I want people to have their own concept of neighbourhood and create it. I think that a master plan for Vancouver that's strictly designed to serve commercial and development interests is problematic. If the city is too planned and too produced we become nothing more than disinterested inhabitants.

In what ways does design inform or determine social behaviour or experience?

I'm interested in the way that people experience architecture and engage with public space. I don't think that anyone is going to notice this project for example. There's not enough awareness to result in any kind of lasting memory. Was this here? Is this the same place? You're never really sure because it's always changing and our collective memory loss is symptomatic of an inability to contain or capture the city. As a result, I think that we're not really in tune with our surroundings. We're not really aware. Things that are generally perceived as quite static or reified in the world, in terms of architecture, are plastic for me. Another False Front is just a gesture, it's a desire to see something happen. My hope is that in actually making something happen, a gesture such as this might activate the city in undetermined ways, open up a dialogue, or create some other level of consciousness or awareness, and that some of these things might become personal for people.

Reece Terris' artistic practice explores the relationship between constructed space and constructed psychologies through a variety of media including sculpture, performance, installation and photography. Terris' consideration of built and designed space is informed by personal experience as a professional contractor. Reece Terris graduated from Simon Fraser University in 2005 and has had solo and group exhibitions at venues such as the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver; The Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham; The Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre, Banff; and the Surrey Art Gallery, Surrey. His monumental project *Ought Apartment* was most recently featured in a solo presentation as part of *Next: A Series of Artist Projects* from the Pacific Rim at the Vancouver Art Gallery.

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